

Amendments to the Claims:

The following listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Claims 1-28 (cancelled).

29. (New) Laser welding apparatus, in which a laser beam is impinged upon a component to be welded at a laser beam impingement point, wherein plasma suppression means is arranged to impinge a jet of gas on the component at an angle between about 38° and about 52° to its surface, flowing towards the laser beam impingement point, at a distance of at least 1mm from the laser beam axis, such that the gas is deflected across the laser beam.

30. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 29 wherein the laser welding apparatus comprises a laser head to focus the laser beam on the laser beam impingement point, and there is provided a nozzle adjacent the laser head that, in use, provides a jet of high velocity gas over the laser head.

31. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 29 wherein the apparatus further comprises a gas extraction means located adjacent the laser beam, diametrically opposite the plasma suppression means.

32. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 29 wherein the plasma suppression means is adapted to supply gas to impinge the component at an angle of between about 38° and 52°.

33. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 32 wherein the plasma suppression means is adapted to supply gas to impinge the component at an angle of about 45°.

34. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 29 wherein the plasma suppression means is adapted to supply gas at a rate of between about 10 and 18 litres per minute.

35. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 34 wherein the plasma suppression means is adapted to supply gas at a rate of about 14 litres per minute.

36. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 29 wherein the plasma suppression means comprises tubular supply means.

37. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 36 wherein the inner diameter of the tubular supply means is between about 6 mm and about 10 mm.

38. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 29 wherein the gas supplied by the plasma suppression means is an inert gas.

39. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 29 wherein the plasma suppression means is adapted to supply gas to impinge the component at a distance of between about 1 mm and about 5 mm from the laser beam.

40. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 39 wherein the plasma suppression means is adapted to supply gas to impinge the component at a distance of about 4 mm from the laser beam.

41. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 29 wherein the plasma suppression means is arranged such that the gas exits the suppression means at a distance from the component surface of between about 2 mm and about 5 mm.

42. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 41 wherein the plasma suppression means is arranged such that the gas exits the suppression means at a distance from the component surface of about 2 mm.

43. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in claim 30 wherein the nozzle is a spray head nozzle.

44. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 30 wherein the high velocity gas exits the secondary supply means at, at least, 30 m/s.

45. (New) Laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 30 wherein the exit nozzle comprises a row of small tubular outlets.

46. (New) A laser welding apparatus as claimed in Claim 31 wherein the gas extraction means lies between about 2 mm and about 5 mm from the surface of the component.

47. (New) A method of laser welding a component the steps of, focusing a laser beam on substrate component, moving the component relative to the laser beam such that the laser beam impingement point moves in a welding direction, and supplying a plasma suppression gas to impinge the component adjacent the laser beam impingement point, wherein the gas flow is arranged to impinge the component at an angle of between 30° and about 60° to the component surface, and at a distance from the laser beam of at least 1 mm.

48. (New) A method of laser welding a component as claimed in Claim 47 wherein the plasma suppression gas is supplied to impinge at a point that lies behind the laser impingement point in the welding direction.